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WORLD REPRESENTATIONS IN LANGUAGE EXAM BATTERIES: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TEXTS USED TO TEST READING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

Adopting the view that “anything said or written about the world is articulated through language from a particular ideological position” (Fowler, 1991:10), the basic assumption upon which this thesis rests is that the texts used by English language examination systems are invested with the particular ideologies that characterize the institutions which are responsible for the exams. The basic aim of the thesis is twofold: (a) to explore the ways in which the texts used to test reading comprehension in three popular English language proficiency exam batteries in Greece (i.e. the state certificate for language proficiency, known as the KPG Exams, the Cambridge ESOL Exams, and the Michigan Exams) linguistically construe or represent the world, and the subject positions they create for their readers, and (b) to develop a systematic and accurate model of analysis that will best serve this purpose.

Understanding that “the grammar of a language is its theory of reality” (Kress and Hodge, 1993: 7), the present study, which follows the traditions of Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Testing and adheres to the principles of Halliday’s theory of language as social semiotic, combines the methodological tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics with corpus linguistics techniques and attempts a detailed lexicogrammatical analysis of a corpus of texts. This corpus of texts consists of three sub-corpora, each containing 31 texts from each exam battery. The analysis, which focuses on the investigation of the experiential and interpersonal meanings the texts make, indicates that the texts of each examination battery sub-

corpus are characterized by particular linguistic and discursive choices, by means of which three different realities are construed. The method of analysis applied in this study has helped reveal the different ideological positions from which the texts of each exam battery are articulated, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of the SFL analytical tools, particularly in combination with those of corpus linguistics, in studies with critical aims.

The importance of this study, lies in that, apart from providing a systematic method of lexicogrammatical analysis, by revealing the ideological implications of English language tests, viewed as powerful social institutions which administer and introduce specific knowledge, it also

introduces a critical and political angle from which to view texts for teaching and testing language(s). In fact, the ultimate goal of this thesis and consequently the gap in the current literature it hopes to fill in is to generate a critical stance to the content of foreign language testing, by clearly demonstrating that there are particular linguistic constructions of reality in the texts used for testing reading comprehension.